BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — The National Academy of Sciences expects to start taking applications this fall for the $500 million assigned to the 30-year research program set up as a result of criminal settlements from the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The Advocate reported (http://bit.ly/1maU8SC) the first set of applications was announced this past week as part of the release of a "vision document" outlining the program's first five years.

"With this vision, the Gulf Research Program has the opportunity to tackle large, complex issues across geographic and disciplinary boundaries over the long term, with the potential to have a significant impact on the Gulf region, its ecosystems and its communities," said academy president Ralph Cicerone.

The program's goals include improvement of oil production safety as well as to better understand how people, the environment and energy production are connected. Another target is to advance research into the changing ecology of the Gulf Coast region including loss of land on the Louisiana coast.

"This plan seems well thought out. It addresses concerns that many of us have expressed about workforce development and education, long-term monitoring and observation, and leadership and policy development," said Christopher D'Elia, dean of the LSU School of the Coast and Environment.

Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network, said the environmental group is happy with the plan's focus.

"We are pleased that the program will focus on environmental sustainability and enhanced industry safety in its first five years," she said.

Grant applications will be accepted for research into safety training for offshore workers and into the connections between the coastal ecosystem and energy production with human health. Other applications will be taken for two-year university faculty fellowships and science policy fellowships for graduate and professional school students.

If something goes wrong again like it did at the Deepwater Horizon in 2010, it's the institutions and workers in the Gulf States that will be the first to be affected and the first to respond, D'Elia said.

"We're really struggling, as most universities are, to keep the graduate fellowships going," D'Elia said. "This really will help fill a gap for us."

Gulf States universities also pushed for better environmental monitoring in the Gulf.
According to National Academy of Sciences, the program will be launching the first competition for environmental monitoring grants next year.


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